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Rommel's Desert Campaigns, February 1941-September 1942:

A Study in Operational Level Weakness

by

Major Donald E. Kirkland
Infantry

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This study is a historical analysis to determine why Rommel's tactical success on the battlefield could not accomplish strategic objectives in North Africa. Rommel's operations are reviewed from his arrival in North Africa in February 1941 through his last offensive to destroy the British Eighth Army at Alamein in August-September 1942. The study compares his ability to conduct tactical operations with his apparent inability to plan and execute actions at the operational level of war. Rommel's problems with operational planning are addressed within the scope of campaign planning principles set forth in FM 100-5, Operations, (Final Draft). His planning is expressly judged on how he shaped his operational plans by using the concepts of aims, resources, constraints, and restrictions to conform to strategic guidance. Rommel's tactical execution is contrasted with his operational performance. This comparison is based on the AirLand Battle tenets of agility, initiative, depth, and synchronization.

The study concludes that Rommel's failure lies in planning operations that exceeded his resources and conducting needless operations that resulted in the loss of the initiative at the decisive point. Rommel's plans exceeded the strategic objectives desired by the theater strategists. His execution was ultimately defeated by his quest for tactical victories without regard to how they contributed to achieving campaign objectives.

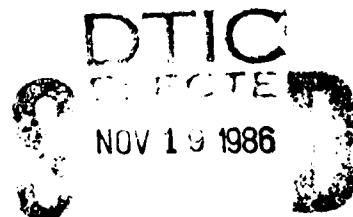
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INTRODUCTION

Field Marshall Erwin Rommel- the Desert Fox. Perhaps no other general in World War II commanded such respect from friend and foe alike. His legendary exploits in North Africa prompted one of his opponents, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, to dispatch a memo to his senior subordinates reminding them that Rommel was no superhuman. The memo further warned of the danger to morale if the British troops continued to view Rommel as having almost supernatural powers.¹ The British Prime Minister, considering the appalling defeats inflicted by Rommel on the British Army, still referred to him in Parliament as a "daring and skillful opponent" and "a great general."² At the beginning of the war he was a newly promoted general officer and commandant of the Fuhrer's field headquarters. Three years later he was a Field Marshal, threatening to destroy the last British field army opposing the European Axis.

Rommel described his style of warfare as "...the art of concentrating [one's] strength at one point, forcing a breakthrough, rolling up and securing the flanks on either side, and then penetrating like lightning, before the enemy has had time to react, deep into his rear."³ These principles, used so effectively by Rommel on the desert battlefields, constitute the tenets of agility, initiative, depth and synchronization in the U.S. Army's AirLand Battle doctrine as they apply to fighting and winning battles and engagements.

Despite Rommel's tactical victories, his campaigns did not

result in the achievement of German or Italian strategic objectives in North Africa. This failure was not due to the fortunes of war, but rather to Rommel's inability to plan and execute a campaign designed to achieve the desired national objectives. This resulted in unexploited tactical successes and costly engagements with no operational purpose. It eventually forced Rommel into accepting battles of attrition which left him too weak to exploit if he won, and which effectively finished the campaign if he lost.

As an operational planner, Rommel failed to implement the strategic guidance issued by his superiors. This guidance described the conditions which would achieve Germany's theater strategic goals. Rommel did not foresee what sequence of actions would most likely produce those conditions, and did not use his allocated resources to accomplish the sequencing of those actions in the best manner .⁴

The effects of poor operational planning were compounded by Rommel's inability to apply the concepts of agility, initiative, depth and synchronization at the operational level. His skill in applying these tenets to translate combat power into successful battles and engagements failed him when he needed to convert tactical victories into attainment of operational goals. A review of Rommel's campaign in North Africa from his arrival in the spring of 1941 until his last offensive in Egypt in the summer of 1942 provides clear examples of Rommel's tactical successes being squandered by his operational weakness.

THE DESERT CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

Hitler viewed any operations in the Mediterranean rim with extreme caution. Politically, the Mediterranean area was a melange of conflicting Spanish, Vichy French and Italian spheres of influence. Any attempts by Hitler to influence one nation to take action against Allied interests in the area ran counter to the interests of the remaining two. The best example was Hitler's effort to induce Vichy France to cooperate in an effort to seal off the eastern entrance to the Mediterranean after a British fleet attacked the French Navy at Oran in July 1940. His negotiations were scuttled by Italy's uncompromising demand for French territories in Europe and Africa in compensation for her last minute contribution to the German campaign in 1940. The French flatly refused to join an Axis Alliance in the Mediterranean because of these Italian demands. Hitler's efforts to convince Mussolini to withdraw his claims resulted in a growing distrust of German interests by the Italian government.⁹

Hitler soon tired of this political Gordian Knot and turned his attention to the East. Russia, the predominant threat to Germany, received his primary attention. Any serious thought of assisting Mussolini's expansion in North Africa was tabled for two reasons. First, the Italian invasion of Egypt in September of 1940 was followed by a German offer of one Panzer division for use in the operation. In the process of making this offer, the German High Command sent General von Thoma to Africa to determine the feasibility of operations there. His report stated that the supply

problems in the theater were almost insurmountable and that at least four panzer divisions would be needed to insure success. To Hitler and his strategists, allocation of four panzer divisions were impossible in light of the planned invasion of Russia. Additionally, in October 1940 Mussolini told Hitler that the panzer unit would hardly be needed. This brash rejection of assistance coupled with the Italian surprise invasion of Greece infuriated Hitler, and the plan to send troops to Africa quickly faded.⁶

In December the Italians suffered disastrous reverses at the hands of General O'Connor and XIII British Corps. In ten weeks the British destroyed ten divisions, captured 130,000 prisoners and advanced over 500 miles into Cyrenaica.⁷ Hitler moved quickly to prevent British occupation of Tripoli and the possible collapse of the Fascist government in Italy. On 11 January 41 he issued Directive 22 which called for a blocking force to move to Tripolitania, and Fliegerkorps X to operate against British ports and shipping in the Mediterranean.⁸ The blocking force consisted of the 5th Light division, a special type of mobile unit stressing mobility and firepower over assigned troop strength. It consisted of a panzer regiment, two machine gun battalions, two recon battalions, and a small regiment of field and air defense artillery. A newly organized panzer division, 15 Panzer, joined this force to form the Deutsches Afrika Korps, DAK, on 19 Feb 41. Hitler himself selected Rommel as its commander, basing his choice on the General's demonstrated ability in semi-independent operations, his stamina, and his tactical skill. Hitler briefed

Rommel on the nature of his mission in North Africa, stressing the need for defending Tripolitania from further British incursions. But the qualities that made Rommel an excellent choice for autonomous operations caused him to rebel against orders limiting exploitation of success. A noted historian later wrote: "Hitler intended the Afrika Korps to be a stone wall: Rommel made it an avalanche, moving under laws of its own." *

Rommel arrived in Tripoli in February 1941 determined that he would not only stop the British advance but ultimately throw them back into Egypt. He received control of the Italian X Motorized Corps and used it and the advance units of the 5th Light to establish defensive positions 200 miles farther to the east than planned by his Italian superior, General Gariboldi.¹⁰ Rommel then began to probe for weak spots in the British defense while the remainder of the DAK disembarked in Tripoli.

Meanwhile, the British had halted O'Connor's offensive toward Tripoli to send a large force from Africa to conduct operations in Greece. Sensing a softness in the XIII British Corps's defenses, Rommel returned to Berlin to request additional reinforcements and permission to conduct offensive operations. Both the Army High Command, OKH, and the German High Command, OKW, refused. The Afrika Korps was meant to be only a blocking force to sustain Italian morale and to protect Libya from further British incursions.¹¹

Rommel ignored his directives and launched an offensive as soon as he returned to Africa. He quickly turned what was officially a probing attack into a full scale exploitation. Rommel used his direct access to the OKW and Hitler to foil General

Gariboldi's attempts to limit his advance. After overwhelming the thin British defensive outposts, Rommel seized the initiative, split his forces on three axes of advance and overwhelmed the entire British position in Western Cyrenaica by use of speed, shock action, and deep thrusts into the enemy rear echelons. The remnants of the British corps fell back to the Egyptian border, leaving the fortress of Tobruk to stand as a strongpoint behind Rommel's line. Lacking the strength to take the fortress by a direct attack, Rommel laid siege to the fortress and again requested additional forces to continue his attack. The German Army High Command sent General Paulus to inspect operations. Paulus confirmed the High Command's fear that the DAK was in a tactically strained situation, logistically unsupportable and strategically over-extended.¹² He reluctantly agreed to Rommel's plan to storm Tobruk, but reemphasized OKH's objective which was to conduct a limited strategic defense of Italian territory.

Reinforcements reached both sides in May. The remainder of the DAK, primarily the 15th Panzer Division, arrived and joined the 5th Light in defensive positions along the Egyptian-Libyan border. Upon arrival of reinforcements, the British launched a hastily prepared counteroffensive in the Middle of June 1941. The purpose of the operation, code named Battleaxe, was to destroy the Afrika Korp's panzer units in direct battle, relieve Tobruk, and continue on to Tripoli. To equip the force, the last tank reserves in England were transported to Egypt, but Churchill's impatience to relieve Tobruk left the British little time to complete preparations .

On 15 May 1941 the British offensive opened and almost immediately ran into difficulty. The British advanced in three separate and uncoordinated columns, providing Rommel with an opportunity to engage and defeat each element in detail. By the end of the first day, over half of the British tank force had been lost.¹³ By 17 June the operation was cancelled. Churchill relieved the Middle East commander, General Wavell, and replaced him with General Auchinleck.

Changes were taking place on the Axis side as well. The 5th Light Division was given an additional panzer regiment and converted into the 21st Panzer Division. A third division was formed from various independent motorized infantry and panzer units to form a new light division similar to the old 5th Light. This division, christened the 90th Light, joined all other German and Italian forces in the operational area to constitute Panzergruppe Afrika. It consisted of the two panzer divisions of the DAK, the 90th Light, the two motorized divisions of the Italian X Corps and four infantry divisions of Italian XXI Corps. Only the Italian XX Mobile Army Corps, controlled by the Italian Commander-in-Chief North Africa, remained independent of Rommel.¹⁴

Following the British defeat in the Battleaxe operation, Rommel continued to invest Tobruk while attempting to build up supplies and forces to resume his offensive. The British added to their forces to form the Eighth Army under the command of General Cunningham. The new army placed most of the infantry divisions in the XIII Corps, while the armour divisions were grouped under XXX

Corps. Cunningham planned a second operation to relieve Tobruk. The infantry of XIII Corps would seize the frontier positions, allowing XXX Corps' armor to swing south to defeat the DAK and relieve Tobruk.

The operation, code named Crusader, jumped off in the middle of November 1941. Rommel was convinced the initial assault was a deception effort and continued his attempts to crack Tobruk. As a result, the British achieved total surprise and with their overwhelming numbers should have crushed the DAK as planned. Their failure to do so was the result of poor tactical cooperation between brigades, resulting in an uncoordinated effort to locate and engage the DAK. Rommel's failure to react as predicted and the dispersion of British brigades resulted in a sandwich layering of units. British troops in Tobruk were surrounded by Italian divisions and the 90th Light, who were threatened from the rear by lead elements of the 7th British Armoured Brigade and the 2d New Zealand Division. This threat was realized by the commander of the DAK, General Cruewell, who moved on their rear and who in turn was being attacked in the rear by the remainder of British XXX Corps's armoured brigades. The flexibility and experience of the DAK enabled it to prevail in the swirling maelstrom of tactical engagements which resulted. The British again suffered the piecemeal defeat of their lead brigades. At this point Rommel realized the scope of the British offensive and, believing that the majority of British armoured brigades were destroyed, took personal command of the DAK in a lightning dash to the east along the Eighth Army's internal corps' boundary. For two days the

Panzergruppe Headquarters was out of contact with the senior leadership as Rommel became deeply involved in fighting scattered, uncoordinated battles of encounter. Meanwhile, British XXX Corps elements were close to defeating the Panzergruppe units investing Tobruk and effecting a link-up with its garrison. In desperation the senior officer remaining at Panzergruppe Afrika headquarters, Colonel Westphal, on his own authority ordered the DAK to withdraw from its operations in the British rear and return to assist the remainder of the panzergruppe. Rommel's "dash to the wire" (the border between Libya and Egypt) operation had achieved little but the shake-up of the British command. On the 26 November Auchinleck replaced Cunningham, whom he felt was too defeatist in attitude, with General Ritchie.

The loss of key leaders and the destruction of irreplaceable equipment in the battles east of Tobruk now made any continued investment of the fortress impossible. The British brought up fresh reserves, while naval and air operations in the Mediterranean cut Rommel's supply lines. On 10 December the British relieved Tobruk and Rommel could no longer resist the British advance into Cyrenaica. Panzergruppe Afrika had only 40 operational tanks in the two DAK divisions. The Panzergruppe retreated west, leaving over 13,800 troops cut off and isolated.¹⁹ Following at a respectful distance was the British XIII Corps. Benghazi once again fell to the British on 25 December, and by the end of the year Rommel's forces were back at their original defensive lines at El Agheila. There, with shortened supply lines, Rommel's forces made a remarkable

recovery. With the newly arrived Luftflotte 2 dominating the skies over Malta, supply convoys arrived in increasing numbers.

Rommel launched a spirited offensive on 21 Jan 1942, surprising both his superiors and the newly arrived and disorganized 1st British Armoured Division. Nearly duplicating his previous offensive in May, Rommel recaptured Benghazi and much of Western Cyrenaica. The British were able to bring the attack to a halt along a line approximately 35 miles west of Tobruk. Both sides assumed a defensive position along a line running from Gazala on the coast south to Bir Hacheim.

During March and April of 1942, both sides prepared to resume the offensive. General Ritchie prepared to undertake a methodical build-up of forces, allowing Rommel to attack first and exhaust his forces on the infantry strongpoints of the Gazala Line. Ritchie then planned to seize the initiative with his fresh armoured brigades and drive Rommel out of Africa. Ritchie was in the process of changing his plan and preparing to launch an offensive when Rommel struck first.

Rommel's second offensive toward Tobruk was better organized than his previous effort. His command had been upgraded to Panzerarmee Afrika, and now included the XX Italian Corps with its one armoured and one motorized divisions. In addition, the panzer strength had been increased in the DAK to 332. Rommel planned to outflank Eighth Army in the south, cut off British reserves, and seize Tobruk by a coup de main. At Tobruk he was to reorganize while Field Marshal Kesselring conducted airborne operations to take Malta and secure his sea lines of communication once and for

all. Once Malta was subdued, plans could be made to continue into Egypt to take Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

Rommel kicked off his attack on 26 June 1942, and immediately ran into heavy resistance. The British strength had been drastically underestimated, but once again tactical inflexibility precluded the British from concentrating their superior force. Rommel fought his way out of an encirclement in the Battle of the Cauldron on 5-6 June, destroying 200 British tanks, 7 regiments of artillery and inflicting 6,000 casualties.¹⁶ Finishing off the surviving British armor on 12 June, Rommel attacked past Tobruk, and then in a turning movement launched a surprise attack to take the fortress.

At this point Rommel made a fateful decision to depart from the original plan. Promoted by Hitler to Field Marshall and elated by his victory at Tobruk, Rommel believed that the British were finished and should not be allowed to retreat into Egypt. A quick thrust to encircle and finish off the surviving Eighth Army units was possible using captured supplies. Over the protests of Kesselring and the Italian High Command, he convinced Hitler to cancel the operation against Malta. The next day Rommel collected his units and set off in pursuit of the retreating British. Operating outside effective air cover and with depleted units, Rommel caught up with the British when they attempted to make a stand at Mersa Matruh.

General Ritchie's decision to stand and fight to the end at Mersa Matruh was rejected by his superior, General Auchinleck. He relieved Ritchie and took personal command on the eve of the

battle. He further decided that he would not stake the existence of the sole British operational force in the Middle East on a last stand effort in Egypt. He reinforced Malta with additional fighter squadrons and returned the 10th Submarine Flotilla to the island to continue operations against Axis shipping. The combined naval and air campaign against Rommel's ports and 1500 mile supply lines virtually dried up the flow of replacements and critical war supplies.

Rommel's hasty attack at Mersa Matruh succeeded in destroying the X Corps as a fighting unit, but failed to prevent the Eighth Army from retreating in good order to El Alamein. Rommel's attack in the First Battle of El Alamein was pathetically weak. His Panzerarmee was down to 55 panzers, 1500 German and 5500 Italian infantry.¹⁷ Rommel attempted to batter his way through a supposedly tired and immobile British force. But Auchinleck had placed the XXX Corps, rested and reinforced, in strong all-around defensive positions called "boxes". The surviving German tanks were met by superior tank reserves in a battle of attrition forced on the Germans because they had insufficient fuel to bypass the British defenses. By 5 July tank losses and lack of supplies forced Rommel to halt his attacks. Auchinleck responded by launching a series of limited counterattacks aimed at the weak Italian infantry. Their collapse forced Rommel to use his remaining reserves to patch holes in his line at an ever increasing pace. Unfortunately for Auchinleck, his successes were too little and too late. Although he had stopped Rommel, he could not rally his forces to assume the offensive. On 13 August General

Montgomery arrived to command the Eighth Army, and two days later Auchinleck himself was replaced by General Alexander.

Rommel was rushed reinforcements, including some units originally set aside for the Malta operation. By the end of the month Rommel's panzer strength stood at 203, although most of his German and Italian infantry had no organic transportation.¹⁰ Rommel's last effort to break through the final defensive line protecting the port of Alexandria could be made only if sufficient fuel could be made available. Based on promises by the Italian High Command and Kesselring that the fuel was on the way, Rommel launched an attack on the southern flank of Eighth Army on 30 August.

The attack ran into a hornets' nest of resistance. Montgomery had also increased his tank strength- to 767.¹¹ Moreover, Montgomery knew the approximate time and place of the attack from Ultra signal intercepts and had prepared accordingly. Rommel's initial penetration was soon halted by a concentration of armor and antitank defenses on Alam Al Halfa Ridge. Rommel had neither the strength to assault the position nor the fuel reserves to bypass. His heavy battle losses and news of the loss at sea of all the expected fuel tankers convinced Rommel to withdraw to his starting positions west of El Alamein on 2 September 1942. His last gasp effort to defeat the British and control Egypt had failed. Lack of mobility for his infantry, fuel for his panzers, and sufficient reserves of ammunition forced him to revert to a static defense and a race to build up supplies. From that point forward, the Allies held the initiative in North Africa.

ROMMEL'S WEAKNESS AS AN OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

Every operational planner is responsible for insuring his efforts are geared to accomplishing the assigned strategic goals. In turn, the national command authority must clearly state what objectives are desired. In his great theoretical work, On War, Clausewitz describes the importance of a clear definition of objectives with the following words:

"No one starts a war- or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective. This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail."²⁰

Strategic guidance involves three specific elements. The commander must know what strategic aims his operations must accomplish. He must receive adequate resources for the mission. Finally, he must understand the limitations imposed in the employment of his resources to achieve the desired aims.

Strategic aims describe what conditions must be met to achieve strategic and national policy goals.²¹ Achievement of these conditions constitutes victory.

Resources are the means dedicated to achieve desired aims. Ideally, sufficient resources will always be furnished to insure the aims are accomplished. However, if resources are limited, the

aims must be reduced, resources increased in quantity or effectiveness, or a certain degree of risk must be accepted by the commander.

Restrictions and constraints are two similar terms which describe the limitations on the use of assigned resources to achieve aims. Their primary difference lies in the nature of the limits involved. Restrictions are limitations which the commander cannot exceed. Constraints are actions or events which the commander must perform when employing his resources. Constraints often take the form of firm and uncompromising directives, and therefore are the more restrictive of the two limitations. A good example of restrictions and constraints can be found in General Patton's operation across France in July 1944. Patton's attempt to exploit the collapse of the German defenses in Normandy was restricted by insufficient allocations of fuel. The scarcity of fuel placed a limit on Patton's ability to maneuver, but did not dictate how and where he could move within that operating radius. Patton's plan suffered a greater blow when he was ordered to divert his lead forces to liberate Paris. This directive was a constraint which left Patton no choice but to delay his pursuit.

Considerations of the aims desired, the resources allocated, and the limitations on their use provide the basis on which the commander formulates his plan. As stated, an operationally valid plan must achieve the strategic aims with the assigned resources and within the limitations imposed on their use. Rommel's planning failed to meet the strategic guidance because his aims and the concomitant resource requirements far exceeded the aims and

resources provided by the strategic level of command.

The decision to commit the Afrika Korps to North Africa clearly reflected very limited strategic aims. On 23 November 1940 the German liaison officer attached to the Italian High Command transmitted a report which stated that the Italians were no longer able to prosecute the war in the Mediterranean alone.²² The need to insure Italian continuation in the Axis Alliance made the commitment of German troops in North Africa unavoidable. Political considerations dictated that the German presence south of the Alps remain as small as possible. This was necessary to maintain Mussolini's political prestige and to assuage the "unbounded distrust" of the Germans by the military and political leaders of Italy. With such considerations in mind, German aims in Africa from the beginning were limited to defending the interests of an ally.²³ The leaders of Germany and Italy and their respective military staffs shaped an agreement on strategic aims in the Mediterranean at a meeting in Obersalzberg on 19-20 January 1941. A German general officer who was present wrote that both sides agreed: "The Balkans were to be occupied to prevent the British from establishing bases there, and the loss of Tripoli was to be prevented. These were strategic defensive measures. No decisive operation aimed at driving the British out of the Mediterranean was ever discussed."²⁴

Limited aims require only limited resources. Rommel's DAK initially consisted of one light division and one understrength panzer division. Logistic units were limited to those required to support a defensive campaign extending at most 300 miles from

Tripoli.

In view of limited aims and resources, the Army High Command, OKH, restricted Rommel to a defensive role. Generalfeldmarschall Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, personally briefed Rommel prior to his departure to North Africa.²⁵ Rommel was restricted to conducting only limited attacks and was told not to commence large scale operations without approval from the Army High Command.²⁶

The desirability of keeping the Mediterranean as an Italian area of responsibility constrained Rommel to operate under the control of the Italian Commander-in-Chief, North Africa. The Italian High Command was responsible for the shipment of DAK supplies, which meant they could control when and where those supplies would be transported. Rommel managed to evade the first constraint on his planning by taking advantage of an agreement between the German and Italian High Commands. This formal agreement allowed the German commander in Africa the right of direct access to the OKW under certain conditions. The logistical constraint proved more difficult, and in the end was the Italians' most effective leash on Rommel's operations throughout the campaign.

The operational planning guidance provided to Rommel began to unravel almost immediately. The limited defensive strategic aims envisioned by the High Command in Africa did not agree with Rommel's views, which included the idea of a limited (for the present) offensive strategy to regain Cyrenaica and push the British back into Egypt. Rommel's desire to change the strategic

guidance was based strictly on tactical capability and not on an appreciation of the overall strategic situation. Since this self assumed change in aims was not supported by the High Command, the resources, restrictions, and constraints remained as planned. However, Rommel was determined to capitalize on the offensive opportunity and altered the aims to suit his own definition of limited strategic defense.

Rommel's plan achieved great tactical success, and soon he had invested Tobruk and was poised on the Egyptian border. On 3 Apr 41 he wrote to his wife: "We've been attacking since the 31st with dazzling success...I took the risk against all orders and instructions because the opportunity seemed favorable..."²⁷ This "dazzling" success soon acquired a life of its own. Attempts by the Italian and German High Commands to restrict Rommel to the original aims of the campaign were thwarted by Rommel's direct appeals to Hitler. As a result, the Italian Commander-in-Chief in Africa was replaced, and the staff sent by the Army High Command to oversee Rommel's operations was instead incorporated into the expanded staff of the new Panzergruppe Afrika.²⁸ However, Hitler's tacit agreement to change the strategic aims in Africa was not matched by a corresponding change in the remaining guidance or resource allocation. The Russian Front demanded all available motorized and panzer units. In addition, the logistical resources for a limited defensive campaign close to Tripoli could not support offensive operations over an additional 700 miles.²⁹ Launching the offensive operation without adequate resources resulted in Rommel's forces exhausting their supplies at the

decisive point in the British Crusader offensive.

Rommel's forced retreat in December 1941 and his counteroffensive in January 1942 finally resulted in a stalemate. Almost one year of campaigning had produced a territorial gain of no strategic value. He had accomplished the original strategic aim of preventing a British advance, but at a terrible cost in resources. By establishing operational aims far in excess of available resources, Rommel had accepted an unjustifiable operational risk. Only the tactical superiority of the German forces coupled with British military blunders and missed opportunities gave Rommel a second chance.

Rommel started his next offensive in May 1942 with clearly defined aims. The German High Command, based on Rommel's impressive gains in April 1941, started to consider plans for a drive to the Suez, preparatory to an eventual move across the Middle East into southern Russia. The Italian High Command was anxious only to reach Suez and then move south to liberate the Italian East Africa colonies. Both German and Italian High Commands agreed that Tobruk must be taken and the supply lines secured before any definite plans were made for advancing to the Suez.³⁰ Rommel was given the strategic aim of taking Tobruk. Heavy Axis air attacks on Malta insured that an increased flow of shipping reached Africa with the necessary replacements and material to support the drive on Tobruk. As part of the strategic plan, Rommel was restricted from moving past Tobruk until Messelring had occupied Malta. The only additional major constraint was the need to take Tobruk intact in order to insure

the flow of supplies to the panzerarmee.

Rommel adhered to the plan until 26 June 1942. The capture of Tobruk on that day, his promotion to Field Marshall and the opportunity to exploit success caused Rommel once again to expand his aims to suit the tactical situation. He convinced Hitler to allow him to pursue the British in an attempt to inflict a decisive defeat on the Eighth Army. Once again the magic of victory changed the aims of the campaign without a corresponding adjustment in the other factors involved. Rommel's new campaign plan had strategic aims that oustripped the available forces' capabilities. Further, it failed to consider how constraints would impact on operations in Egypt.

Resource planning for the pursuit into Egypt was limited by the short planning time available. The only resources available to meet the new objectives were the forces assigned at the beginning of the offensive, by now considerably attrited and fatigued, and the supplies from captured stocks within Tobruk. The 2,000 vehicles, 5,000 tons of supplies and 1,400 tons of fuel taken from the British would have to suffice until the Eighth Army could be defeated.³¹ Rommel's planning did not consider what would happen when operations consumed these supplies. His troops were exhausted by weeks of continuous fighting and a prolonged effort would be impossible. In addition, fuel and ammunition were limited to what could be carried. Unless additional stocks could be captured, the distance involved offered little chance that an already over-stretched supply service could react with sufficient quantities to have any effect. The shortage of resources Rommel

had at his disposal to achieve a decisive, campaign-ending battle of annihilation should have made the difference between resources available and aims desired too great to be considered as an acceptable planning risk.

The shortage of forces now uncovered two additional constraints. The Italian forces under his command would by necessity play a greater role in the upcoming battles. Their defeat in battle would now have a greater impact on overall success of Panzerarmee Afrika. The second constraint would arise in the event of victory. Would Rommel have sufficient forces to defend his conquests successfully? The plan to defeat the British and occupy Egypt made no provision for defending the conquered territory. Rommel started his pursuit with only 60 panzers and 40 obsolete Italian tanks. The 90th Light could only muster 1,600 troops. The X Italian Corps at that time had a combined strength of 14 tanks and 2000 infantry.³² The strategic aim to reach the Suez implied an ability to prevent its recapture by a British Eighth Army which had repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to reconstitute quickly. Therefore it was imperative that the British be decisively defeated before additional reinforcements arrived from England or from bases in Iraq under the control of the Commander-in-Chief, Far East Command in India. Should the Eighth Army fight a delaying action through Egypt or receive significant reinforcements, the demands of fighting credible enemy forces and occupying key strategic areas would prove insurmountable.

Rommel's success in taking Tobruk was a tribute to his tactical ability and an operational plan that conformed to the

parameters of the strategic guidance. After the fall of Tobruk, tactical possibilities again overcame operational realities. With no time dedicated to operational planning, Rommel attempted to conduct a major operation to defeat decisively an enemy falling back on established supply lines. Rommel's faith in his tactical prowess overcame the planning concerns of his staff. But Rommel as an operational planner should have asked at least one question. Should the panzerarmee initiate battle, and if so when and where? A careful study of this question might have supported plans for operations up to Mersa Matruh. Beyond this point, the gap between aims and resources was such that any battle that did not achieve a decisive victory would certainly disrupt any further plans to continue the advance. Rommel accepted this planning risk, a risk made even worse because the need for victory was so great that an alternative plan in the event of defeat was not even considered. This failure to plan a plausible sequel to the battle if won, or a viable defensive plan if lost placed the fate of the whole campaign on the outcome of a single battle. Thus tactical throws of the dice supplanted operational planning at the end of Rommel's offensive campaign into Egypt.

Weak and uncoordinated operational planning forced Rommel to accept a large degree of risk in the execution of his operations and campaigns. However, even a poor plan will suffice if it is well executed. In Rommel's case operational execution only magnified the effects of flawed planning and personal ambition.

Rommel's tactical use of agility, depth, and synchronization to gain the initiative in battles and engagements is legendary. A

classic example was the Battle of the "Cauldron" in the summer of 1942. Rommel's attempt to outflank the Gazala Line on 26 May 42 was stopped by a combination of heavy tank losses and lack of supplies. Rommel was forced to assume defensive positions after being surrounded in an area later to be known as the "Cauldron". Within 10 days, Rommel had regained the initiative by the use of agility, synchronization and depth to create a synergistic effect that destroyed the cohesion of the British defense before the British leadership could devise an effective response. The initiative thus gained was sufficient to cause the collapse of the British defensive line forward of Tobruk.

Rommel's failure to display the same adroitness in the use of these principles at the operational level is the result of his disregard of the differences in the levels of warfare. At the operational level, impromptu planning and execution failed to compensate for the need to visualize what course future operations would take, the enemy's reaction, and how to counter this action or to take advantage of it. The need for operational execution based on anticipation and planning versus sensing and reaction becomes apparent when studying Rommel's use of agility and synchronization above the tactical level.

Operational agility requires the commander to visualize how forces can maintain physical and moral cohesion in order to concentrate effectively against enemy vulnerabilities. Operational synchronization requires the commander to foresee how he will produce activities and events that will focus combat power at the decisive point, or by their effect cause the enemy to uncover a

key objective for decisive attack by other activities.³³ Agility and synchronization require a commander to anticipate how their employment will produce the desired effect, and then to insure his intentions are understood, properly planned, and coordinated at all levels. Rommel's rash pursuit of the British beyond Mersa Matruh failed to take these factors into consideration. Months of careful planning and coordination were upset, resulting in the loss of synchronization and agility. This disruption started immediately after Tobruk, and spread throughout the Mediterranean area.

Field Marshal Kesselring planned to take advantage of the effect of Rommel's victory at Tobruk to invade Malta, which was vulnerable while the British concentrated their attention on stabilizing the Eighth Army. Hitler cancelled the operation in favor of Rommel's request to continue into Egypt. Rommel's short-sighted insistence on exploiting tactical success as a matter of routine cost the Axis Powers their final opportunity to secure the Mediterranean lines of communication to North Africa.

Rommel's advance upset the Luftwaffe's operational agility at a critical time. The majority of the air units had been repositioned to support the invasion of Malta and were out of supporting range for Rommel's operations in Egypt. Therefore one of Rommel's most potent operational weapons, combining rapid concentration (agility) with the ability to act as a combat multiplier (synchronization), was unavailable during the first critical days in Egypt. Equally important, the Luftwaffe's ability to concentrate its full combat power was never realized since its strength was diluted by the need to suppress Malta and protect

merchant shipping.

Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika had suffered 5 weeks of constant fighting without rest, refit, or reinforcements. The success at Tobruk had been a tremendous morale-booster, but physically the forces were now too thin to keep any form of operational reserve to exploit tactical success. The lack of reserves and the physical exhaustion of the troops contributed to the loss of operational agility. This was apparent when the 2d New Zealand and later the X Corps were able to break out of their encirclements and regroup on the El Alamein positions. This continuing erosion of strength and Rommel's relentless demand for one final push reached its climax at the First Battle of El Alamein. Panzerarmee Africa's initial small gains could not be exploited because Rommel had neither the operational reserves in being nor the capability to free committed forces and move them rapidly to concentrate against gaps in the British defense. This physical weakness soon led to the disintegration of moral cohesion, and for the first time the effects of panic began to infect German troops.³⁴ This loss of agility and synchronization led to the loss of momentum and the subsequent forfeiture of the operational initiative to the British.

The lack of resources to maintain the momentum gained at Tobruk points out the effect of depth, the extension of operations in time, space, and resources.³⁵ Rommel's failure to understand depth beyond the tactical level has its roots in his total disassociation from the logistical problems of supporting his operations. Two brief anecdotes underscore this problem. At one

point, Rommel requested two additional divisions to pursue operations in Egypt. When asked by the Army Chief of Staff how he proposed to support them, Rommel replied that it was quite immaterial to him, as it was the Chief's problem.³⁶ In his later writings on the North Africa Campaign, Rommel insists that he could have overrun El Alamein in July 1942, "... but our supplies dried up--thanks to the idleness and muddle of the supply authorities on the mainland."³⁷ Such examples show that Rommel was unaware that his ambitious pursuit of tactical success made operational support impossible in terms of the impact of time and space on resources.

In his book, Supplying War, Dr. Van Creveld makes a credible case that Rommel's supply problems were not a question of shortages, but the impact of insufficient port capacity and transport infrastructure to insure timely arrival to the user.³⁸ Rommel was dependent on two ports, Tripoli and Benghazi, for shipment of supplies to support his operations toward Tobruk. From these two ports, truck convoys had to make a one way trip of 1500 miles and 700 miles respectively to reach Tobruk. Supply operations over such distances were affected by friction, the "... accumulation of chance errors, unexpected difficulties, and the confusion of battle..³⁹ Friction took the form of sporadic but effective air interdiction of the single road from the ports to the front, or chance encounters between Italian supply ships and Royal Navy strike forces. Friction was also a natural product of the supply system itself. Some types of supplies such as fuel and spare parts were consumed in transit, and trucks required to

provide mobility for the infantry had to be diverted to support supply operations. The fact that the patched together logistics system enabled Rommel to reach Tobruk at all is a clear testimony to the ingenuity of Rommel's staff.

For operations beyond Tobruk, the impact of logistics on operational depth took on increased importance. Rommel was entirely dependent on the captured stores in Tobruk to continue his advance. This finite amount of resources limited the time and space in which Rommel could seek a decisive battle with the Eighth Army. In effect, operational depth worked against Rommel, who could no longer choose when and where to fight. Rommel's belated recognition of the impact of logistics on operations was realized in later years when he wrote in his memoirs that "...the battle is fought and won by the Quartermaster before the shooting begins."

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When victory at Mersa Matruh failed to cause the collapse of the Eighth Army, Rommel ignored the mounting evidence that any further advance would almost certainly mean exceeding the offensive culminating point of his panzerarmee. As defined by FM 100-5 (Final Draft), the culminating point is that stage in the offense beyond which the strength of the attacker no longer exceeds that of the defender, and continued operations risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat.⁴¹ After Mersa Matruh, Rommel had the capability to defend his gains and execute sequels to the original campaign plan of holding Tobruk. While not decisively defeated, it was apparent that the British were in no shape to launch any offensive operations in the near future.

Therefore Rommel could have used the time and space won at Mersa Matruh to assume the defense. Using his immobile Italian infantry divisions to fortify and garrison Tobruk, Rommel could have freed his armored forces for a mobile defense to the front and flanks of the fortress, a form of operations that best suited his tactical style of warfare. This would have assured the retention of Tobruk, his original assigned strategic objective, and provided a strong base for subsequent operations into Egypt.

Rommel instead chose to continue in the vain hope of a tactical victory resulting in a quick strategic decision. His failure as an operational commander was now complete, for his acceptance of tactical risk after Mersa Matruh was in effect an operational gamble he could not possibly win. A victory would be meaningless since the British had already decided to decline decisive battle in Egypt. On the other hand, a defeat would expose Rommel's center of gravity, the largely immobilized panzers of the DAK, to almost certain destruction if the British were willing to take advantage of the opportunity.

Instead of planning and executing tactical events to further operational aims, Rommel was reduced to gambling on tactical outcomes to further operational efforts. Years after the campaign in North Africa had been decided, Field Marshal Kesselring commented: "The fact that, in the final analysis, victories and defeats came to determine the further conduct of operations must be considered as the prize mistake of the German Command."⁴²

CONCLUSION

Rommel's success in North Africa derived from the lessons of the First World War and the French Campaign of 1940. As a light infantry commander in 1914, Rommel used stealth, supporting fires, and the indirect approach to outmaneuver and defeat opponents who remained tied to the principles of positional warfare. The use of tanks in France in 1940 gave Rommel new insight on employing the same tactical principles on an even larger scale. These lessons provide present day tacticians with excellent examples of how the tenets of the Airland Battle doctrine can be applied to win battles and engagements. However, his abject failures as an operational artist provide equally important examples of the consequences of failure when tactical success dominates operational planning and execution.

Rommel's operational planning was characterized by his stubborn refusal to reconcile his operational plan with strategic guidance. The German High Command correctly viewed the Eastern Front as the dominant theater, and in their strategic aims, resourcing, restrictions, and constraints clearly indicated to Rommel that only a limited effort was desired in North Africa. Rommel's insistence on planning operations which exceeded the goals assigned by the theater command was in response to a tactical weakness displayed by the enemy. His desire to exploit tactical opportunities did not consider strategic priorities or national policy objectives. This resulted in operational planning based on an insurmountable difference between operational aims and operational resources. Rommel counted on his ability and

experience as a tactical commander to offset the planning risks involved. However, these talents did little to prepare Rommel for the transition to a new level of war. As operational commander, Rommel had to plan for sequels to tactical battles and engagements. His failure resulted in unexploited victories, and magnified the impact of defeats.

Initially, Rommel's superior tactical performance compensated for his planning shortfalls. But as time, distance and losses progressed, the immutable laws of logistics began to take effect. Tactical success cannot drive operational decisions. The temptation to achieve strategic aims that are beyond operational means cannot be bridged by a reliance on tactical shortcuts unless one can assume a cooperative enemy, surely one of the most dangerous assumptions a military planner can make.

Rommel's execution of the campaign plan demonstrates the danger of allowing tactical success to sequence operations. In his attempt to exploit the successful battle of Tobruk, Rommel placed himself in a position where he could no longer decide to accept or decline battle. Before that point, he could still execute several options of the campaign plan. Rommel could have established a defense on the Libyan border as desired by the Army High Command. He then could have reverted to a defensive strategy, or used the time gained to plan and prepare for continued offensive operations into the depth of Egypt. His blind pursuit of a tactical advantage resulted in an operational check which irrevocably consigned him to a static positional defense at El Alamein. Montgomery's offensive three months later came as an anticlimax to a campaign already operationally forfeited.

The recent revision of FM 100-5 stresses the importance of the operational level of war. Paramount in our operational doctrine is the seizure and retention of the initiative to defeat the enemy and achieve the strategic objective. This does not mean that the initiative must be seized at every tactical opportunity, but only at the time and place of our own choosing and in furtherance of our operational purposes. This requires that operational commanders and their staffs understand the intent of the strategic guidance, produce a plan within the established guidelines, and conduct operations which fuze tactical successes into operational accomplishment of desired strategic goals. Rommel's failure to do so in North Africa resulted in wasted victories, lost resources, and eventual defeat in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.

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